



## Tensions and a New Song

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedgis*

*The Third Sunday after the Epiphany. ~ January 26, 2020*

### Isaiah 9:1-4

“But there will be no more gloom for the land that was in anguish! In the past God humbled the land of Zebulun, the land of Naphtali; but in the future God will bring glory to this Road to the Sea, this Land beyond the Jordan, this Galilee of the Nations. The people walking in darkness are seeing a brilliant light— upon those who dwell in a land of deep shadows light is shining! 3 God, you have made the nation greater—you have brought them abundant joy! They celebrate in your presence as with the harvest celebrations, or as warriors celebrate when dividing spoils. For the yoke that burdened them, the weight on their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors—you have shattered it, as you did at the defeat of Midian.

### Psalm 27:1, 5-13

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| 1 God is my light and my salvation;<br>whom then shall I fear? *   | above my enemies round about me.  |
| God is the strength of my life;<br>of whom then shall I be afraid? | 9 Therefore I will offer in your dwelling an oblation<br>with sounds of great gladness; * |
| 5 One thing have I asked of you, O God; one thing I seek: *        | I will sing and make music to you.  |
| that I may dwell in your house all the days of my life,            | 10 Hearken to my voice, O Most High, when I call; *                                       |
| 6 To behold your fair beauty, O God, *                             | have mercy on me and answer me.   |
| and to seek you in your temple.                                    | 11 You speak in my heart and say, “Seek my face.” *                                       |
| 7 For in the day of trouble  | Your face, O God, will I seek.  |
| you shall keep me safe in your shelter; *                          | 12 Hide not your face from me, *  |
| you shall hide me in the secrecy of your dwelling                  | nor turn away your servant in displeasure.  |
| and set me high upon a rock.                                       | 13 You have been my helper; cast me not away; *   |
| 8 Even now you lift up my head *                                   | do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.   |

### 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

I beg you, sisters and brothers, in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, to agree in your message. Let there be no factions; rather, be united in mind and judgment. I have been informed, my sisters and brothers, by certain members of Chloe’s household, that you are quarreling among yourselves. What I mean is, one of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” another, “I belong to Apollos,” still another, “I belong to Cephas,” still another, “I belong to Christ.” What—has Christ been divided into parts? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Was it in Paul’s name that you were baptized? Frankly, I’m thankful I didn’t baptize any of you, except Crispus and Gaius, so that none of you can say you were baptized in my name! Oh yes, I did baptize the household of Stephanas, but no one else as far as I can remember. The point is, Christ didn’t send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel—not with human rhetoric, however, lest the cross of Christ be rendered void of its meaning! For the message of the cross is complete absurdity to those who are headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God.

### Luke 6:27-36

“To you who hear me, I say: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well. 30 Give to all who beg from you. When someone takes what is yours, don’t demand it back. “Do to others what you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. If you do good only to those who do good to you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ do as much. If you lend to those you expect to repay you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to other ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. Love your enemies and do good to them. Lend without expecting repayment, and your reward will be great. You’ll rightly be called children of the

Most High, since God is good even to the ungrateful and the wicked. “Be compassionate, as your loving God is compassionate.

Good morning, God's people.

Wow, it's cool to be standing here. For guests and visitors, this is my first Sunday preaching as the new Associate Rector here at St. Peter's.

But it's not my first time ever preaching here. Many of you know St. Peter's was my home parish, and I was blessed to preach here a handful of times before I was ordained.

Now I've changed as a preacher, since my last time in this pulpit. I like to think for the better, but, regardless, I want to highlight one of those changes right away: when I preach, I ask for what I want.

What do I mean?

Well, if you've worshipped at an Episcopal church for any length of time, you may have noticed that, when it comes to the sermon, we can be a "reserved" bunch. I know not everyone has been on this side of the sermon exchange, but y'all can be hard to read. Every preacher I know has had this internal dialogue while preaching: "This is going...well? Awful? Maybe they're bored? No! ... Angry? I'm crushing! I'm crashing!" Stand up comedians have nothing on Episcopalian preachers.

The irony, of course, is that after the service many preachers receive compliments and gratitude for our sermons. An appreciated but pretty disorienting whiplash.

All to say, about a year ago, I decided to ask for what I wanted while preaching. I want to know you're with me...or not with me. When I say a word about the gospel, I want to know you're hearing it. I want to hope you're finding a way to believe it; to believe God is at work in the world, in your life. And I want to invite you to be glad about it.

So, are y'all ready to do some preaching and proclaiming together? If you came here looking for a sign of God's love, say Amen. If you came here because you're feeling hurt or lost, say Amen. If you came to give thanks, Amen. If you came here today because your parent, friend, or some other loved one made you come, you can still say Amen. Let all God's people say, Amen.

Oh we've got some good texts today, don't we?

In the midst of tragedy and doom, a burst of brightness: The people have seen a great light / The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear? / My favorite is Matthew's restating of Isaiah:

*and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.*

Perfect texts for our this season of Epiphany: a season where light is the sign of Jesus' divine manifesting among us and of our own revelation - the "aha" moments when we connect those manifestations - those epiphanies - to God's love for us.

But there are tensions between this brightness and the rest of the texts.

Isaiah announces this promise but also destruction. The psalm begins with praise, but turns into plea: Hide not your face from me...cast me not away...

Matthew says Jesus is fulfilling Isaiah's words, but Jesus is also on the run. Fleeing Nazareth because John the Baptist has been arrested and he could be next.

There are also tensions between this brightness and *our* lives.

Whether you're imagining scenes from your own life - a fight with a loved one, trouble at work, lingering hurt; or scenes from our shared life - scorched land, a spreading virus, gun violence, the impeachment trial...it feels like we are still very much sitting in the shadow of death.

There are tensions within these texts. There are tensions within us.

And we do not like tension.

That makes sense. Tension sucks. Tension in your neck. In your relationships. In our world. We can only handle so much before we need relief. Take a deep breath in and hold it for five full seconds. Exhale it out - tension *and* release. We need both. This isn't weakness. Part of our imago dei - part of God's image in us - is our desire for resolution, our longing for reconciliation.

Tension is an inevitable part of life. It's not meant to last always, but it always lasts longer than we'd like. What matters is how we respond to tension.

Just this week, I heard a piece of music for the first time. It's called *Quartet for the End of Time*, written by French composer Olivier Messiaen. Are any of you familiar with it?

It's a very unusual and, at the time, unconventional composition. Messiaen wrote most of it after being captured while serving as a French soldier during the German invasion of 1940. It was first performed in January 1941 within the walls of Stalag VIII-A prisoner-of-war camp, in Görlitz, Germany, on a freezing night in Barrack 27. A fellow-inmate drew up a program in Art Nouveau style, to which an official stamp was affixed: "Stalag VIIIA 49 geprüft [approved]." Sitting in the front row— and shivering along with the prisoners—were the German officers of the camp.

Messiaen included this inscription with the score: "In homage to the Angel of the Apocalypse, who lifts his hand toward heaven, saying, 'There shall be time no longer.'

And that's what Messiaen did: he ended time. This composer no longer wanted to hear time being beaten out by a drum—one, two, three, four; he had had enough of that as a soldier and now a prisoner. War and its marches and its timetabling soured his love of constant rhythms. Instead, he devised rhythms that expanded, contracted, stopped in their tracks, and rolled back in symmetrical patterns.

That's powerful isn't it?

Now I want you to imagine you're listening to the radio. Maybe you're in your car, in your kitchen cooking, at your desk. And this piece comes on. You don't know all of the stuff I just shared - you're just hearing the music.

In particular, the fifth movement begins to play. Messiaen instructs it to be played "infinitely slow." It is just the cello and piano playing and it is haunting. Both instruments,, kind of with each other and kind of to each other, but just as their parts are about to meet, they diverge. The music stretches and stretches, builds and builds and then...evaporates. All tension, no resolution.

How do you respond?

Do you turn the radio off? Call someone into the room to listen? Is the tension suddenly in your own body?

One of our most common responses to tension is anxiety, and we express that anxiety in four main ways: we triangulate; we start a conflict; we distance ourselves; we over or under function.

All of these are at play in our reading today from 1st Corinthians. Paul has received word that this early faith community is divvying themselves into smaller groups: Those who belong to Paul. To Apollos. To Cephas. To Christ.

This may sound petty, but surely it does not sound unfamiliar. (Mmph)

The thing we need to know about the Church in Corinth is that it was vibrant and growing. All kinds of people were drawn to the story of Jesus' resurrection, and suddenly all those people were in the same place, including people from very different social classes.

And this caused, you guessed it, *tension*.

In particular with the Lord's Supper, where, suddenly, instead of there being those who ate and those who served -- *everyone* was invited to eat, *everyone* was called to serve. Alleluia, am I right? This is the longed-for heavenly banquet!

But it seems this table-for-all made some in the church incredibly anxious. So they found a way to ease the tension: Paul had already put the kibosh on people throwing around their class status, but there was another common social practice in Corinth.

People could join groups associated with a certain patron or saint. A wealthy person started and funded the group and, in return, the members of the group were charged with competing against the members of rival groups.

So that's what's going on in our reading, people are establishing competing groups in the church and naming them after different Christian leaders like Paul and Apollos. /

These kinds of systems give a sense of control. Declaring who is in and who is out. Who matters and who does not.

No one thinks these systems are perfect, but most of us can afford the imperfections and inequalities in exchange for the comfort and control. And those who cannot are usually the easiest to hide or ignore within these systems. They become the enemy, the scapegoat, or the foot soldiers.

Best of all, with these systems, the powerful never have to confess that anxiety. Never have to name the tension between wanting everyone to be treated equally, while also resenting or fearing the loss of power preserved by

structural inequality. No one ever has to admit we chose our own comfort over our neighbors' dignity. Instead, we perpetuate systems that promise to reward our agitation and soothe our discomfort, and to do it quickly, even if it is at the expense of others.

You may have guessed I'm not exactly talking about 1st century Corinth anymore.

This is the kind of living God laments and Jesus denounces.

The tensions you are experiencing in your life, that we are facing in this country are painful and they are real. But when we respond with anxiety, we will settle for these cheap resolutions.

Or like Peter, Andrew, and those sons of Zebedee, we can follow Jesus into the tension. Move towards each other, instead of away. Listen to the different, even opposing, rhythms of our lives, and create a new response.

I said Messiaen's Quartet was unconventional. In part, because of his treatment of time. But also because it's a Quartet written for piano, cello, violin, and clarinet. That's an unusual, maybe even incompatible, combination. But those were the musicians in the camp, the instruments available.

And while it is indeed Messiaen's composition, its impact is less about the triumph of individual genius and more in its power as a collective creation.

This unlikely quartet echoes all of our sacred stories: In the face of tension, the powerful will try to silence others' voices. But when those voices come together - expand and include - they form a new sound, a new movement, a new reality. It's happening right now: Black Lives Matter, Poor People's Campaign, the Domestic Workers Alliance.

How are we, as the Church, responding to the tensions of our world?

The name of that fifth movement is *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus*, Praise to the Eternity of Jesus. It's a hymn. Messiaen plays out the pain of war and hate and ruined time. But also the proclamation that Christ is not bound by time, cannot be stopped. This is not a praise of power for power's sake, but for love's sake: to proclaim the impossible to understand, mind-blowing love of God.

I cannot shake that there, in the movement of pain and praise, where the tension runs right through us, is where Christ is at work.in.us. That is where God is, in the rhythms that find new ways to continue along without ever obeying a regular beat.

Earlier I asked you to imagine listening to that fifth movement on the radio. Let's do one better, and end this sermon with the last two minutes of it. How will you respond to the tension?

I invite you to experience it like Messiaen did, as someone who'd been pushed to the margins of an anxious world, and, from there, discovered how to make a new song.

Or, as one musician put it, "as one who expects paradise not only in a single awesome hereafter but also in the epiphanies of daily life."

May it be so. Amen.